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## Problem Definitions: Understanding the NGO Response to Sex Trafficking

Principal Investigators: Marguerite Hernandez

The U.S. Department of State estimates that 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year. Of these, 80 percent are women and children, most of whom are trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

Marguerite Hernandez's dissertation explores the efforts of non-governmental organizations and government agencies to curtail and combat human trafficking. Although NGOs must coordinate with each other and with government agencies, little research evaluates the effectiveness of these groups and their ability to work together.

Hernandez investigates this subject by interviewing NGO representatives and government officials involved in efforts to fight trafficking. Mershon funds allowed her to conduct interviews in southern California, northern California, St. Paul/Minneapolis, New York City and Washington, D.C.

Through these interviews, Hernandez focused on three questions:

- How do organizations frame the problem of human trafficking?
- What successes do organizations have and what obstacles do they face?
- How effectively do organizations collaborate?

Hernandez found that NGOs frame the problem of human trafficking in different ways. One frame frequently held by feminist and religious NGOs claims that the primary cause of human trafficking is the demand for a commercial sex industry. A second frame holds that while the sex industry is part of the problem, a larger cause of human trafficking is the demand for cheap labor. A third perspective contends that it



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is not essential to understand the root causes of trafficking, but that helping the victims is more important.

Hernandez also found that how NGOs frame the problem of human trafficking affects the amount of funding and networking opportunities available to the organization. This is because a few established NGOs that believe the sex industry is root cause of human trafficking have historically forged strong ties with state and federal agencies. These NGOs are frequently given large grants and told to share this money with other NGOs. Thus, other NGOs are willing to go along with the dominant frame to understand human trafficking in order to gain funding.

Frames, networks, funding and law enforcement were major issues that NGOs identified in reaching common objectives. NGOs believe that government should require training on human trafficking for police officers and service providers. Often, these public employees are the first to come in contact with trafficking victims, yet they lack the ability to identify and direct victims to help.

Hernandez's dissertation provides one of the first empirical views on relations between organizations and agencies combating human trafficking. She presented her findings at the 2008 Southern Sociological Meeting in Richmond, Va. Next, she plans to submit professional papers on her research to peer reviewed sociological journals.

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